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8 Intermediality, for the Sake of Radical Neutrality, in Peter Friedl's Work

Hilde Van Gelder

In the spring of 2010, Peter Friedl formulated an intriguing request for an internationally composed group of critics and curators. He sent them his recently published collection of selected writings and interviews from 1981-2009, asking each person to pick one short passage to discuss at a public event at the Beursschouwburg in Brussels. My choice fell on an interview of the artist by Marie-Thérèse Champesme, dating back to 1998, the time of his much-noted exhibition at the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts.

In the interview, he addresses the power of artistic images in contemporary society. 'what is important,' Friedl says, 'is to know whether one believes in the images and trusts them or not (Franke, 2010: 116).' This question runs as a red thread through Friedl's artistic production. He has repeatedly confirmed his 'commitment to make accessible the creative potential of images (Friedl, 2011: 62),' in order to increase the artistic image's empowering potential. For, he is convinced, 'All images lie when they are not read right (62).'

How can we read images correctly? Recent theory, in particular with regard to photographs, has often downplayed the power of representation.[1] Nevertheless, Friedl is skeptical of this depreciation. In his view, images always partake in a

power game, however diverse the causes that they intend to serve may be: for example, propaganda for a political regime, the sake of the market, or critiques of reigning social hegemony. In Friedl's view, certain artistic images can contribute to understanding this mechanism. His method is therefore investigative: within the realm of the aesthetic, his works seek to temporarily disarm dominant power configurations in society via the creation of what he calls, in a conversation held with Gean Moreno, 'an intelligent, competitive image (Franke, 2010: 207).'

According a particular attention to the intermedial character and the place of photography in Friedl's work, this essay both identifies and scrutinizes some such 'images,' which are brought about through Friedl's art. It departs by defining these images while scrutinizing his long-term preoccupation with the animal metaphor. From there, it will be asserted that real equality among human beings is a central ambition of every single visual work or written text by Peter Friedl. To that extent, it will be indicated that it is his entire body of work that needs to be taken into account as a whole, as an interactive, discursive totality. A selection of examples among many others is used here, in order to validate this way of understanding his oeuvre. From such an analysis, it becomes clear that Friedl's work is also strongly marked by an anti-archival impulse. Subsequently, it is possible to assert that the radical neutrality that is characteristic of all of his works allows for a truly critical art to emerge.

Metaphorical Substitutes

Not coincidentally, the aforementioned book's cover contains a photograph of Brownie, the male giraffe that died as a consequence of a fall on 19 August 2002 in the Qalqiliya zoo, after having panicked about the noise generated by an Israeli invasion of the Palestinian town that day. His female companion, Ruti, subsequently lost her unborn baby out of grief (http://dform.at/thezoostory/index_en.php [accessed January 8, 2013]). Both animals, father and baby, were stuffed and are now preserved in a specially constructed space next to the zoo. Friedl arranged to send Brownie as his contribution to Documenta XII in 2007, entitling it *The Zoo Story* (fig. 1).

In Kassel, visitors encountered Brownie standing up alone in the architecturally bombastic main space of the Documenta Halle. A sense of displacement

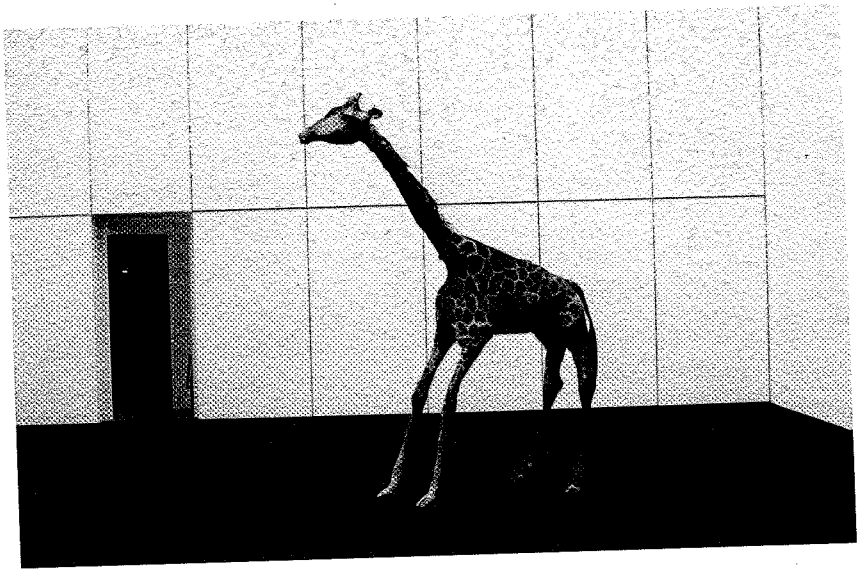


Fig. 1 Peter Friedl, *The Zoo Story* (2007). Taxidermized giraffe from the Qalqiliya Zoo, 351 x 66 x 278 cm. Installation view at documenta 12, Kassel. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Katrin Schilling.

and distress was strongly tangible upon seeing him amidst the rather chaotic ensemble of artworks. It was as if the poor, mute giraffe found himself lost in an overcrowded amusement park. Yet exactly this context proved to be highly productive: for those who took the effort to remain by him, Brownie easily engaged their imagination. This engagement allowed, I would propose, the emergence of a reflexive image for the viewer.

Such an image, in W.J.T. Mitchell's understanding, develops itself in the spectator's mind, simultaneously departing from a concrete visual or visual-textual stimulus, and 'seem[ing] to float without any visible means of support.' It is a 'phantasmatic, virtual, or spectral appearance' that reveals itself to us during our experience of the artwork. As appearance, it somehow separates itself from the artwork as a picture, which nevertheless is the image's material support. 'You can hang a picture, but you cannot hang an image,' he clarifies. The image is 'what can be lifted off the picture, transferred to another medium, translated into a verbal ekphrasis [...] (Mitchell, 2005: 85).' Peter Friedl actively seeks to create a wide range of such reflexive images that, when combined together, propose a coherent narrative for their spectators. The 'pictures,' or material supports that contain these images (in some sort of transcendental way), which Friedl constructs, can consist of the widest possible variety of materials and media—including, not to be neglected, texts.

About this creative mechanism of meaning production, Friedl has claimed that central to his research is the discrepancy between the 'concept' and the 'realization' of an artwork (Franke, 2010: 116). There is always a gap between the intended and the produced meaning of an artwork. But that exactly is a fascinating void. It is in the transitory, fragile space where the work of art produces its own meaning—or releases its reflexive image—that new political insights, new philosophies, new ways of living together can be imagined. 'Critical intimacy' between the work and the spectator, he argues, is therefore a central triggering factor for the genesis of such a reflexive image in the spectator's cognitive imagination (Friedl, 2011: 62).

Friedl is known for taking a quite anti-Darwinian approach to life and for feeling a spiritual affinity with animals (De Keulenaer, 2011: 65). It is generally assumed that animals operate on a lower level of consciousness than human beings. In the artist's view, one needs to approach this positively: animals continue to live and act as they have done since time immemorial. For, unlike one among them—humans—they have not obtained the mental and physical freedom to function less in agreement with the laws of nature. Animals, says Friedl, 'have sacrificed themselves so that humans are allowed to exist (Franke, 2010: 117).'

Giorgio Agamben has famously argued that humans, since distancing themselves from animals, have created a hiatus within themselves. Agamben urges humans to risk themselves in that emptiness and to question profoundly 'the practico-political mystery of separation' between man and animal (Agamben, 2002/2004: 92). In other words, Agamben asks humans to productively suspend the suspension of their animal status. *The Zoo Story* visualizes that suspension: it metaphorically provides an imaginary potentiality in which animal and human consciousness are put on an equal level. When experiencing the stuffed giraffe, at one time lovingly named Brownie by a human being, as a reflexive artistic image, we are incited to think emphatically of its distress as if it were our own under the same circumstances.

The perspectives that this mental exercise provides for human beings are rather confrontational. Bringing to mind John Berger, W.J.T. Mitchell has recently warned that whatever has been done to animals at some point in time has subsequently been done to human beings (Mitchell, 2009: 135-137). Animals throughout the history of art, Mitchell posits, have been associated with divination, augury, and prophecy, from Lascaux to the futuristic dinosaur in *Jurassic Park*. As a consequence, the animal image, such as released in Friedl's *The Zoo Story*, is a crucial clue to predict the future.

The temporality of such an animal image is filled with potentialities. It both embraces the past and the future: it evinces a time before humans distanced themselves from animals, but it also warns humans of the choices to be made in the future. Shall humans reinvent more harmonious modalities of joint life with animals (and with other human beings), or will the brutality of *zoē* once again win against *bios*, Mitchell wonders. In his opinion, the latter scenario will inevitably lead to the cloning of human beings, bringing with it the risk that humans will be treated as they now treat animals, as bare and naked life (*zoē*). Mitchell, it is well known, therefore proposes suspending disbelief in the power of representation and taking the animal image seriously, as it urges us to engage anew with its vitality, with the desire for bio-political change that it evokes.

In a conversation with Anselm Franke, Peter Friedl expresses his commitment to fighting the doom scenario for humankind that Mitchell sketches. In his view, filling the hiatus between man and animal implies a reconsideration of the operative terms of global capitalism: 'in capitalism's "mimetic standard program,"' he argues, 'there are really only bodies left (Franke, 2010: 219).' By this, he is hinting at the body in its bare state of animal life, to man as *homo sacer*, as Agamben defined it (Agamben, 1995/1998). It is a state that allows for exceptions in the treatment of human beings by other humans (e.g. concentration camps), and which needs to be actively resisted (Agamben, 2003/2005). Artists can contribute to that resistance via their work, not in a naïve way or for the sake of marketing, but by truly saying 'no' and at the same time acting on it, Friedl insists. Of course, he adds perspicaciously, this kind of aesthetic resistance 'is a rather lonely business (Friedl, 2011: 61).'

The reflexive animal image, as generated by Friedl's work, is thus a key metaphorical substitute for visualizing the horrors of humans against humans. When Friedl asked the staff members of the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts to tell him what animal they had once desired to be, for example during childhood, people came up with various creative ideas, and no one really thought it an odd proposal (De Keulenaer, 2011: 75). He concludes that humans unconsciously long for a mythical, lost state of perfection that the animal embodies. Friedl's art wishes to turn this irrational desire into a productive force.

So, how then are we to both trust and correctly read these metaphorical substitutes that Friedl proposes? In direct response to Mitchell, and building on his theory, Jacques Rancière suggests treating works of art *as if* they pretend to want a wide variety of things (Rancière, 2009: 131). *The Zoo Story* settles for just that: if one approaches the work as if it wants something, then one can creatively read the aesthetic meanings that it produces as a reflexive image. During his lifetime, Brownie was moved from Apartheid South Africa to the West Bank, and found a tragic death there. No longer alive, his form traveled on to Kassel, where it stood silently and immobile, petrified. As a mere picture, Brownie was but one stuffed giraffe among many others. In the context of the Kassel exhibition, however, it indeed turned into 'an intelligent, competitive image.' This reflexive image urges our cognitive imagination to do justice to the disaster of Brownie's displaced life. Indeed, Friedl states that an exhibition needs to function as 'a "medium"—as the site of a public staging where art spins its own web; where images are experienced as the production of a narrative rather than as the illustration of an already existing narrative (Friedl, 2011: 62).'

Aesthetic Equality

Peter Friedl has added many more images to the one already discussed in order to construct his artistic narrative, and he has done so by employing any medium that suits his purposes. In a key essay entitled 'The Curse of the Iguana: On Genre and Power,' which dates back to the year 2000, Friedl—an expert in zoology—takes the iguana as a metaphor in order to discuss issues that touch at the heart of contemporary geopolitics. One of the iguana's important natural habitats is the Caribbean island Hispaniola, which also, harkening back to Mitchell's observations concerning animals and divination, set the stage for 'one of the first scenes of *Jurassic Park* (Franke, 2010: 124).' Today, the island is divided into the states of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The northwestern border zone between the two countries has been turned into a national park, on the relatively more prosperous Dominican side. Friedl explains how, at night, poor Haitians cross the border, on the lookout for anything edible that can be poached. As a consequence, several native species, which used to lay their eggs on the beaches near the border, are now nearly extinct (135).

The major part of the text traces a direct connection between the island's colonial history in the past five hundred years and the European metropolis. In line with German student leader Rudi Dutschke's conviction that, in order to halt colonialism, exploitation, and cultural imperialism, one needs to target and effect changes in the dominant power centers, Friedl argues that what matters most today is taking 'the whole world seriously (136).' His opinion matches that of Susan Buck-Morss who, building on the intellectual heritage and ideals of the late-eighteenth century Haitian Revolution, has advocated a human universalism that is shaped by a motley crew 'from below' (Buck-Morss, 2009: 106).

The universalism that Buck-Morss proposes radically includes all human beings and does not de facto exclude some. This 'common humanity' needs to take shape through 'subterranean solidarities (133),' which are a source of enthusiasm and hope because they appeal to universal, moral sentiment. 'Universal humanity,' she argues, 'is visible at the edges (151).' It is encountered in 'the porosity of the space between enemy sides, a space contested and precarious, to be sure, but free enough for the idea of humanity to remain in view;' and, most importantly, it implies a '*radical* neutrality [original emphasis] (150).'

In Peter Friedl's artistic work, this radical neutrality is a key working method. Neutrality is not to be associated with a lack of commitment or open-endedness of intentions. Quite the contrary: it addresses the root of what is at stake in today's world in order to aesthetically imagine a true equality among all humans. Placing mute Brownie amidst the crowd of artworks and visitors in the Documenta Halle was an act of radical neutralization. Describing, quite dryly, the disaster of the destruction of the iguana's natural habitat, is another such act. 'Aesthetic equality,' Jacques Rancière argues, implies 'the neutralization of a certain regime of expressivity (Rancière, 2011: 16).' Aesthetic equality, in Rancière's opinion, realizes itself in the representation of figures whose bodies express nothing, which say and do nothing. Such an act of radical neutralization produces meanings that are, to borrow Buck-Morss' terminology, 'lateral, additive, syncretic rather than synthetic (Buck-Morss, 2009: 151).'

In the essay on Hispaniola, the iguana is employed as a textual, metaphorical substitute. Like many other animals threatened with extinction, the iguana faces difficulties surviving on the island due to the fact that national borders have devastated their natural territory. Friedl's radically neutral account of that fact produces

a reflexive image with which one can connect highly critical thoughts. The picture as object, on the one hand, in the case of *The Zoo Story*, and the written text as material carrier or picture, on the other hand, reinforce one another in the intermedial creation of complementary, reflexive images. Both Buck-Morss and Friedl take the case of Haiti as a mirror and touchstone for contemporary society. Friedl recalls that, in Haiti, he encountered colorful slogans that were present in urban space, on the walls of houses or on busses, that he came to read in terms of 'words that are bodies, images, mirror (Franke, 2010: 139).' This inspired him to work with artistic installations, videos, photographs, and texts all together.

Friedl has expanded his research on the topic of national divisions in a more recent installation, *Failed States* (pl. 7). It is a handmade work that consists of twenty flags sewn together in four rows of five. The first version, dating from 2011, contains (in the following order): Afghanistan - Austria - Basque country - Belgium - China; Colombia - Greece - Haiti - Hungary - Iceland; Iraq - Israel - Italy - Lebanon - Libya; Mexico - Netherland - Palestine - Somalia - USA. In the second one, from 2012 (first exhibited at the Paris Triennale), Haiti and Lebanon are replaced by France and Japan. *Failed States* refers to the infamous 'Failed States Index' published each year by The Fund for Peace—a privately funded US organization, in collaboration with the influential magazine *Foreign Policy* (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/failedstates [accessed January 8, 2013]). Not much more about the work is known except for the fact that it addresses the problematic issue of the list apparently being compiled from data found only in the economic sector, as was announced in the press release accompanying Friedl's first iteration of the piece at his solo exhibition, *Magnificence*, at Guido Costa Projects in Turin (2011). Yet the work clearly tracks hegemonic, ideological patterns that remain largely unaddressed in public debate.

Arranged visually on the basis of a deadpan—radically neutral—alphabetical order of names, the reader may at first take for granted the twenty flags of 'failed states,' presented as blatant fact.

Careful examination, however, reveals that some—such as a Basque country or Palestine—do not exist. In this way, the work reflects upon how exactly 'failure' is to be defined (and what parameters are used toward that aim). It not only evinces the intrinsic imperfection of the concept of the nation-state in general, but also what the conventional arrangement of the current world order, in terms of nation-states, has meant with regard to the treatment of human beings towards one another.

In *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (2007), written together with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler has pleaded strongly for non-nationalistic modes of belonging to the nation-state. She recalls how, in the spring of 2006, during street manifestations in the Los Angeles area, illegal residents sang a Spanish interpretation of the US national anthem, which they titled 'Nuestro Himno' (http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5369145 [accessed January 8, 2013]). Subsequently, George Bush rapidly mandated that the national anthem should only be sung in its official version, and only in English—thus limiting the idea of the nation to the dominance of a linguistic majority. For Butler, the very fact that the variant anthem's central words 'we are equal' were uttered in Spanish, marks an obligation to translate within the heart of any nation. A certain distance or fissure among those who are part of a nation is a preliminary condition for possible equality amongst them. The nation must become a collectivity that exercises its freedom in a language, or a set of languages, where difference and translation are irreducible givens.

Failed States, as an evolving patchwork of flags, appears to be in search of a shared human language that takes diversity as a creative force. Visually, *Failed States* is also strongly reminiscent of a legacy of two-dimensional, modernist abstract art, from Colorfield Painting to the subsequent anti-nationalist critiques it received,

Fig. 2 Peter Friedl, *forty acres and a mule* (2001/2008). Mule, rubber floor mat. Dimensions variable. Exhibition view at Extra City Kunsthal Antwerp, 2008. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Ken Lau.

for example, in Jasper Johns' *Flag* (1954-55). It may thus be seen as a critique of modernism's unfulfilled promises. Along a similar vein, Friedl states about another work, *forty acres and a mule (fig. 2)*, that it is meant to charge the aesthetics of minimalism with political history (De Keulenaer, 2011: 43). He targets the fact that minimalism and arte povera were critical of modernism but at the same time left the problems they addressed unsolved (such as, in the first place, the ambition to create an art that could not be sold).

Forty acres and a mule is a live performance, given several times since 2001 (in Basel, Villeurbanne, Cape Town, among other locations, and the last time in 2008, in Extra City in Antwerp). It consists of a living mule placed on a black rubber floor mat in the exhibition space, close to a wall. While visually referring to the minimalist work of Carl Andre, for example, or the arte povera installations of Jannis Kounellis, its critical implications go beyond such work: in 1865, '40 acres and a mule' was the agreed-upon compensation for freed African-American slaves in the state of Georgia in the aftermath of the Civil War. After the death of Abraham Lincoln, the decision was undone by his successor, Andrew Johnson, and the land was given back to its former owners. As a cross between a horse and a donkey, all male and almost all female mules are infertile. Thus—although for different reasons—the mule finds itself in a similar state to human beings, as also imperfect in relation to other animals. As a melancholy metaphor, it embodies episodes of unfulfilled promises, both in the history of art and in human history more generally, and thus adds to Friedl's collected narrative of reflexive images.

An 'Antiarchival' Impulse

In its 2008 installation in Antwerp, *forty acres and a mule* was accompanied by a series of five, black-and-white photos taken from a long-term project that Friedl began in 1992, called *Theory of Justice* (fig. 3). This work is composed from the artist's vast collection of newspaper and magazine clippings, which Friedl exhibits in specifically designed showcases. A selection of black-and-white photographs from this work was published as an artist's book in 2006. In the context of *Theory of Justice*, Friedl insists on his preference for the term 'collection' instead of 'archive (Franke, 2010: 210).' From an aesthetic point of view, a photographic archive is 'nonsense,' he explains to Gean Moreno, 'unless you dig for mythological information like in the Walker Evans archives (210).' As such, Friedl is part of a larger group of contemporary artists whose work is marked by an anti-archival impulse.

Photographic archives all over the world have increasingly become institutionalized: the previously established idea that the archive be granted a potential, eternal sleep in the place that preserves it, waiting to be more or less randomly discovered by its researchers, is a norm that no longer holds. Photographic archives are meant to be profitable: their consultants are now seen as clients to whom copyright-protected merchandise can be sold in order to fund the institution. Consequently, power relationships have shifted with regard to the distribution of information from such archives: if you don't pay, you don't publish the photo. And even if you are ready to pay, publication may be prohibited if the copyright holder considers the content of your text inappropriate.[2]

As a result, both artists and researchers are increasingly shifting their focus and attention to photographic materials that are more randomly available, that can be used and distributed more freely. Peter Friedl's personal collection is a key example of how significant photographic materials can be found outside of the commercialized institutional context. In this way, he not only points to the limits of a neoliberal model of valuation, but he also avoids the risk of photographic materials becoming subservient to hegemonic forces of power in society. As Allan Sekula has argued, this was often the case during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the point where photography became the dangerous ally of racial stereotyping and the emblematic tool of criminal jurisprudence.

Sekula proposes a reading of the photographic archive 'from below,' in full solidarity with 'those displaced, deformed, silenced or made invisible by the machineries of profit and progress (Sekula, 1983/2003: 451).' Following the example of Walker Evans, Sekula also advances a strong plea for artists to make 'combative and anti-archival' sequences of photographic work (Sekula, 1986/1989: 376). He argues that Evans made his photographs within a logic of resistance to the early twentieth-century, institutionalized photographic archive model. This model tended to relegate the individual photographer to the status of a detail worker (for example, endlessly producing reproductions of paintings), thus providing fragmentary images for an apparatus beyond his or her control. That this type of photographic archive could, indeed, spiral out of control has been powerfully illustrated by

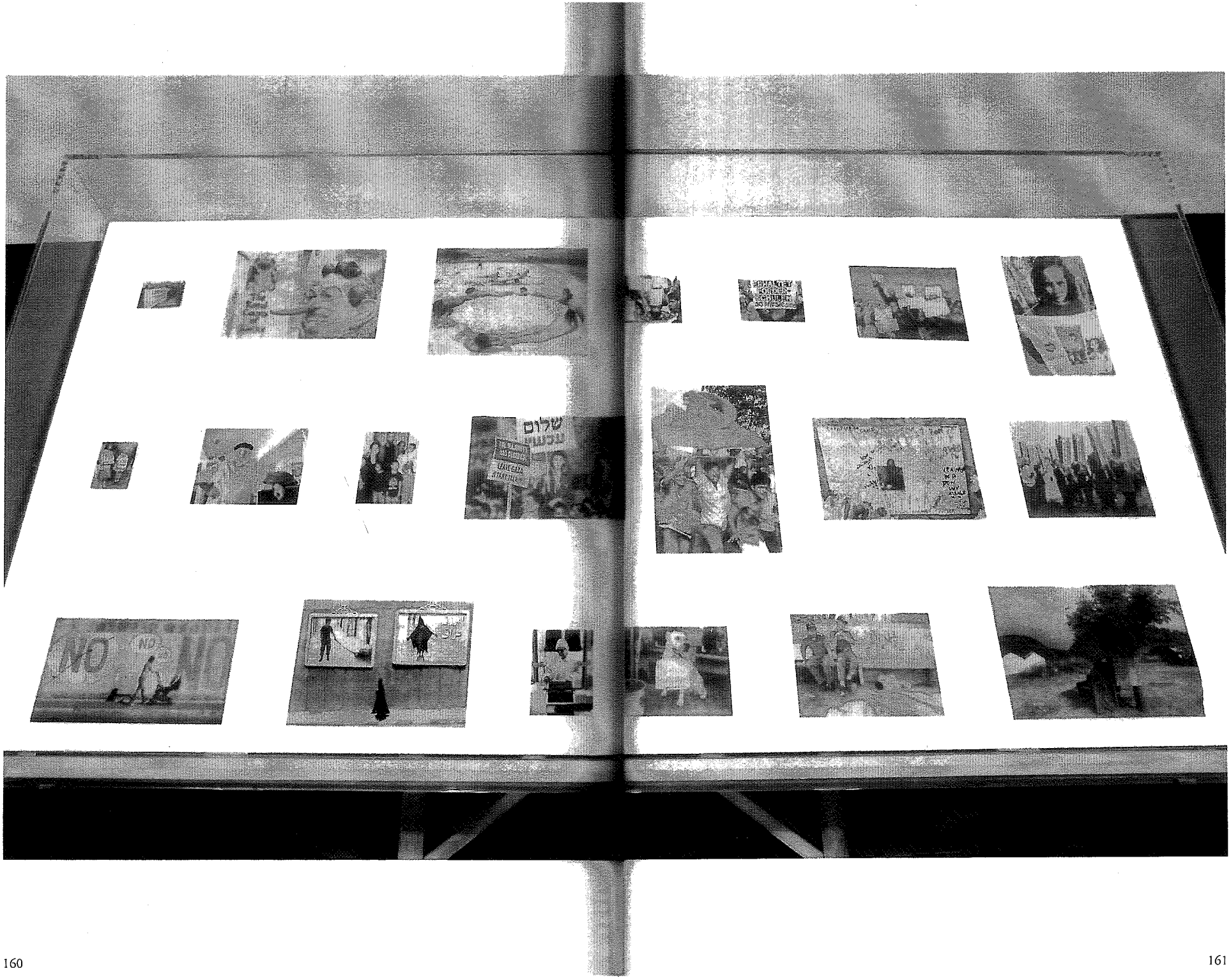


Fig. 3 Peter Friedl, *Theory of Justice* (1992–2006) (detail). Newspaper clippings. Display cases: stainless steel, plexiglas, painted plywood, 100 x 160 x 75 cm each. Exhibition view at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2006. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tony Coll.

Sally Stein (1983), in her study of Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*. She demonstrates how this collection of photographs was employed as proof-material for illegal status, incriminating people in the eyes of the authorities.

When Sekula speaks of Evans' photographic sequences as anti-archival gestures, he means that they point to that which risks remaining invisible when we only attend to the archival 'bureaucratic handling of visual documents:' namely, on the one hand, the sheer disregard of, or on the other hand, the victimization of those depicted by it (Sekula, 1986/1989: 373). In order to avoid both of these problematic viewing mechanisms, he believes, like Evans, in the artistic format of mute, poetic photographic sequences. Friedl's *Theory of Justice* appears also to do just this: it radically goes against the bureaucratic handling of photographic materials and instead, presents a mute photographic sequence. We only know that Friedl determined the order of their display on the basis of the depicted events' chronology, rather than their actual date of publication, which he explained in a press release for his solo exhibition at Sala Rekalde in Bilbao (2010, where *Theory of Justice* was exhibited in showcases).

Theory of Justice is an unfinished project: Friedl is always on the lookout for more materials. As such, his artistic belief in systemic resistance appears to also suggest an implicit claim that, although there is an enormous amount of photographs at our disposal today, there is also always, at the same time, somewhere, a body of photographs that remains inaccessible. Although they may well already exist somewhere, someplace, they have thus far remained hidden from us. In this sense, we can think of the photographs that will eventually become added to the project as the 'optical unconscious' of our era, to employ a term from Walter Benjamin. They point at that which has not yet been properly, photographically archived (as far as we know), and which escapes any strategies of valuation or functionalized visibility.

Theory of Justice, therefore, bears with it the ambition of keeping alive the collective, imaginary memory of potentially yet-to-be-revealed photographs. In an even stronger reading, the sequence would also seem to suggest that future knowledge of these pictures will potentially change our opinion and understanding of the specific situation from which they emerge. As an anti-archival artwork, *Theory of Justice* is a lesson in humbleness with regard to what we may expect from the photographic archive proper. It asks us to not forget that there is a limit to how much we can accept as conclusive knowledge, and reminds us to remain skeptical

when an archival photograph is presented as a keyhole through which to spy on the 'truth' of historical events. 'In fact,' Friedl concludes in discussion with Gean Moreno, 'my collection is shrinking rather than growing (Franke, 2010: 211).'

The Larger Montage

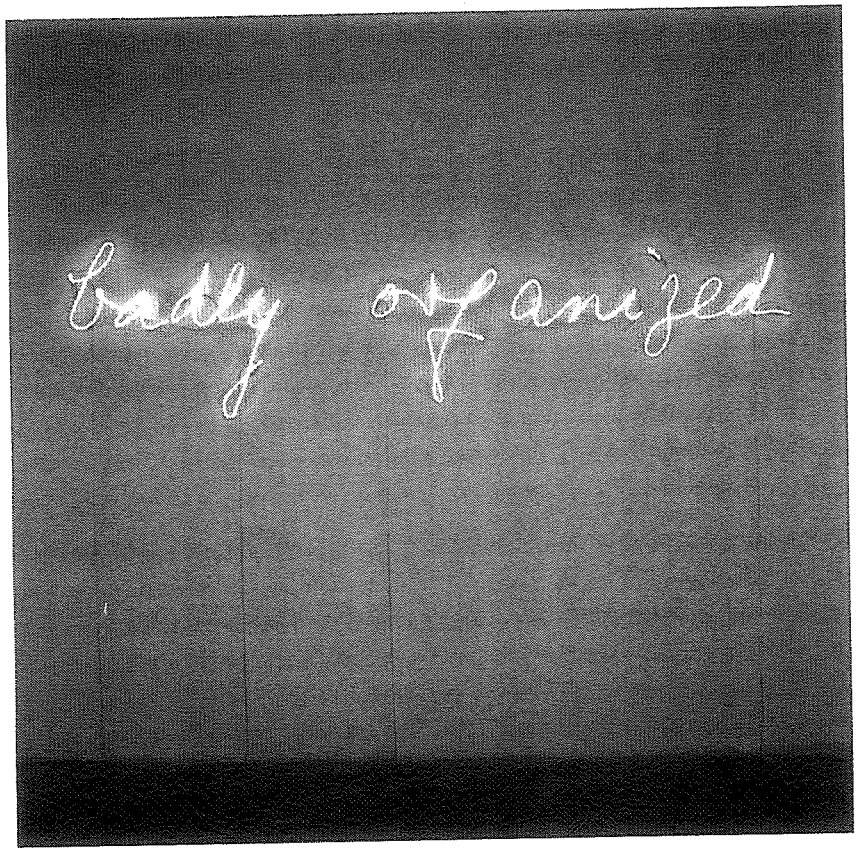
Like *Failed States*, *Theory of Justice* makes us understand how the idea of radical neutralization, for the sake of creating a narrative body of reflexive images, also operates in Peter Friedl's intermedial work beyond the animal-as-metaphorical-substitute. On several occasions, Friedl has confirmed that the title *Theory of Justice* refers to the writings of the American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002), whose *A Theory of Justice* (1971) postulates the possibility of a well-ordered society that is based on an overarching consensus among its members (Friedl, 2006: n.p.; Franke, 2010: 210). However, 'in the neo-liberal present,' Friedl continues, 'the global drama of expulsion and exclusion makes it quite evident that justice and distribution theories are out of touch with reality. Conflict takes the place of consensus (211).'

Friedl's skepticism towards Rawls' theory, however, does not mean that the reference to it has to be taken completely ironically. With *Theory of Justice*, Friedl sincerely calls out for a renewed social contract, for a fair theory of justice that is workable for all living beings in today's globalized society—explicitly taking into account inanimate nature. He provides some first steps in that direction by reversing the terms of the discussion. If we may indeed presume that every theory draws a picture of the world, then what exactly 'happens if the pictures themselves want to become theory?' Is it possible for pictures to achieve the 'pictorial justice (211)' that Friedl desires? To put it differently, how exactly does *Theory of Justice* make a case for the world that it depicts?

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler makes a strong claim for the 'face'—in the sense of the 'Other' given to it by Emmanuel Levinas—as the locus of a moral demand, one for which we might not have asked, but which we may neither be free to refuse (Butler, 2004: 131). Following this argument, it is possible to conclude that the many faces included in *Theory of Justice* represent what Butler calls, quoting Levinas, the precarious Other, our fellow human 'before death,' asking us 'not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death (131).'

It is easiest to understand how this call for our ethical responsibility works when looking at photographs that overtly show victims of war or crimes. In *Theory of Justice*, a small minority of images does exactly that. To be sure, they respond to Butler's call, which Ariella Azoulay has also recently articulated: 'When and where the subject of the photograph is a person who has suffered some form of injury, a viewing of the photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted on others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation (Azoulay, 2008: 14).' Specifically, Azoulay also has in mind images that unmistakably testify to the suffering of the subjects depicted and to the injustice that has been done to them, images that allow a clear reading of the harm inflicted.

Yet several photographs included in *Theory of Justice* do not overtly show direct harm done. Many of them do address protests against uneven distribution of



wealth and opportunities, but others simply manifest instants of happiness. These depict smiling mothers with their children, or cheerful young people. Yet they also call out for our ethical responsibility, for that civic alliance among human beings that Azoulay urges. Like Brownie in the Documenta Halle, these photographs speak to us as reflexive images, in their radical muteness. Their silence is productive, for it prevents both disregard and victimization. Instead, we can identify with the people in the picture. They allow less distance between them and us because, in their apparent happiness, they resemble us—the comfortable spectator of art—much more so than if we saw them as victims of war, crime, or oppression. In the singularity of their individual faces, we encounter the universality of human existence. They were once part of this world, if perhaps dead now, and they might have lived their lives with the aspiration and hope for a better, more peaceful future. However silent, one can agree with Butler, these photographs point 'somewhere else, beyond themselves, to a life and to a precariousness (Butler, 2004: 150)' that they do not necessarily show.

How *Theory of Justice*'s radically neutral presentation of photographs brings about this ethical call for human responsibility is a matter of artistic methodology. At all times, the totality of Friedl's artistic production, which is intermedial in its essence, should be kept in mind when looking at a single work or reading a single text. Allan Sekula has called this 'a larger montage principle,' which is always operative within his own body of work as well, and which exceeds any montage principle internal to a single work, or even one of his books (Risberg, 1999: 238). As with Sekula, an attentive observer of Friedl's works is capable of allowing that larger montage to emerge and, from there, of understanding Friedl's radically neutral approach as one that is geared towards creating reflexive images marked by the greatest possible egalitarian, social engagement.

Untitled (badly organized) (2003) (fig. 4), for example, can be read in immediate discursive relation to Rawls' assumption that it is possible to postulate a well-organized society in constructing a theory of justice. As a radically neutral title, it may not say much in itself. But knowledge of the larger montage of Friedl's writings and works allows for a critical understanding of this piece. However radically neutral in its presentation, the reflexive image that arises in the spectator's imagination is a questioning of Rawls' quickness to pre-posit what is arguably a relative illusion. *Working at Copan* (fig. 5 and fig. 6), an artist book published by Friedl in 2007, consists of interviews the artist held with various working-class

employees at the Copan building in São Paulo, designed in the early 1950s by the recently deceased, acclaimed Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Friedl asks deadpan questions to, among others, the night watchmen, the plumbers, and the janitors about their working activities. Friedl's radical neutralization of concept and approach leads to productive meanings arising in the answers to these questions: simply from reading them, the reader obtains insight into the uneven living conditions and class differences that mark Brazilian society, and thus engages in reflexive imagination. From a metaphorical perspective, many of the anonymous faces in *Theory of Justice* obtain a name and a voice through *Working at Copan*.

Critical Art: A Driving Force for Radical Democratic Citizenship

Working at Copan includes eight, black-and-white photographs: two of them—the first and the last one—were made by the artist in Copán, Honduras in January 2007. They show remnants of ancient Mayan sculpture, mostly depicting animals. The six intermediary pictures contain documentary shots from the construction of the Copan building during the 1950s up until 1960. From the conversation that Friedl held with the building's manager, Alfonso Celso Prazeres de Oliveira, one learns that Friedl feels strongly that the building is slowly but inevitably turning into a 'modern ruin (Friedl, 2007: 127).' The manager, on the contrary, responds that he has been steadily working on the building, reassuring Friedl that, in due time, it will be 'everything-proof (127).'

In the context of both the book itself and Friedl's larger body of work, one can read this short photographic sequence in terms of what Walter Benjamin terms 'dialectical images.' These are images in which the meaning of the past is realized in the present; as if in a flash, the past is illuminated precisely at the moment of its disappearance into the present. Such fleeting images, Benjamin writes, are 'not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it (Benjamin, 1928/1977: 31).' As Eli Friedlander has argued, the dialectical image throws light on the past in a distorted form, bringing out the truths it contains as if awakening it from a dream (2008). The enormous temporal dimension that *Working at Copan* spans—from the Mayan ruins in Copán to the modernist moment when the eponymous Brazilian building was still being constructed—visualizes history in the course of its current making. This is important, for what is to be avoided is the dialectical image's unarticulated disappearance into the past: 'Every image of

the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably,' Benjamin writes famously (Benjamin, 1940/1969: 255).

Friedl's committed, dialectical images call out to us, as engaged spectators. James Agee has written—in a similar vein—on Walker Evans's photographs of sharecroppers: 'who are you who will [...] study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it (Agee and Evans, 1939/2001: 7).' Friedl asks us not to approach his art as its passive addressee, but rather as its dynamic addresser. His works desire a spectator who not only produces meaning for the image, but who also disseminates it further with the intention of transforming this meaning into concrete political action. The 'political' here is not to be taken literally, but rather in the sense that Chantal Mouffe has given it: as a shared space of power and conflict, as the necessary dimension of antagonism that is constitutive of human societies (2005).

How can we conceive of this political spectator? The answer can be formulated in terms of an opposition between today's fashionable, so-called 'active citizenship' (which is a predominantly economic definition) and 'radical democratic citizenship' (containing a predominantly ethical dimension). Active citizenship was a concept launched in a European Union Commission report released in 1998, entitled 'Learning for active citizenship: a significant challenge in building a Europe of knowledge' (http://ec.europa.eu/education/archive/citizen/citiz_en.html [accessed January 9, 2013]). What is meant by this notion is a functional citizen, one who is expected to adapt to, and to engage as efficiently as possible in, the development of today's knowledge society, with increased social cohesion as the set goal (cf. Wildemeersch and Vandenabeele, 2010, who constructively critique this concept of active citizenship). At a time when institutional, photographic archives are preserved for this active or, rather, 'activated,' efficient, optimized citizen that we all are supposed to become (if we haven't already), artists are confronting this reality with questions such as: how, within this model, can critiques of injustice be addressed?

Friedl's works aspire to stimulate a critically reflective attitude with regard to the limits of social optimization through active citizenship. They seek to engage us as radically democratic citizens in the sense, again, that Chantal Mouffe has given to this term (Mouffe and Laclau, 1985/2001: 167-193; Mouffe, 1993: 60-89). It is a conception of citizenship that enables us to critically consider contrasts, conflicts, and dilemmas within a given society, and to take responsibility for finding solutions that will ultimately resonate within our everyday life. Mouffe calls for a democracy that keeps the centrality of 'conflict'—or its agonistic dimension, as she terms it—alive as a constructive force. As Claudia Ruitenberg has argued, in this agonistic space of democracy, a political adversary is not to be confused with a moral enemy: he or she is an adversary, but one fundamentally belonging to the same group or democratic community, and not to be excluded or eliminated (Ruitenberg, 2009: 274).

Mouffe herself believes in the potential of what she calls '*critical* art [original emphasis] (Mouffe, 2007: 4)' to achieve those democratic ideals within society: it is an 'art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate (4).' It is a driving force towards radical democracy, an art that is, she argues, 'constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony (4-5).' Moreover, it even 'tries to disarticulate' that hegemony in favor of the creation of 'an agonistic situation, a situation in which alternatives are made possible (Mouffe, 2012: n.p.).' Peter Friedl's work belongs to critical art defined in this way. It allows us to imagine ourselves as members of a community of human beings who live together and who deal constructively with plurality and difference. As such, we can share the hope that inevitable antagonisms can be channeled towards new, multipolar—as Mouffe calls them (2005: 90-118)—forms of an ethico-political living-together on a global scale, in greater solidarity, which places equality before individual liberty (as favored by neo-liberal hegemony).

Coda: The 'Infantile' Task of Future Generations

Besides the animal, childhood is a central theme in Peter Friedl's works. It would take a separate essay to do full justice to the richness with which he has approached this topic. In the context of the present text, however, I wish to conclude by briefly looking at one work that sheds further light on the issues addressed above: a video entitled *The Children* (2009) (pl. 8). Once again, this 'filmic gesture (De Keulenaer, 2011: 74)'—as Friedl defines his videos—reads as a radical act of neutralization.

Only two minutes and twelve seconds long, *The Children* re-enacts a socialist realist painting from 1966 by the Albanian artist Spiro Kristo, entitled *Fëmijet*—meaning 'children' in Albanian. This painting, which is part of the permanent collection of the Tirana National Gallery of Art, depicts seven children, among whom five are looking down at a chalk drawing of a rifle. One girl, in a white dress, stands up with her back turned to the viewer. The toy rifle (one may presume) hanging over her left shoulder prominently mirrors the street drawing of the rifle below her. Another boy, who is facing her, also has a weapon hanging over his shoulder. Further in the background appears a construction site: on the façade of one of the new buildings, the then-ruling Albanian workers' party abbreviation (PPSh) can be clearly spotted. A young tree situated prominently in the foreground, surrounded by a toy bucket and a spade, completes the peaceful picture.

In the now completely looted and abandoned, but formerly luxurious Dajti hotel—built during the time of the Italian colonization—the viewer of Friedl's video encounters the seven children again, looking down at the same drawing, and wearing the same clothes and accessories. As in a true tableau vivant, nothing is said—certainly quite a strain for children of that age—except for one short sentence, pronounced at the very beginning by one of the girls while the six other children enter the stage. She states (in Albanian): 'The image should stand out from the frame.' This line is taken from Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*: Foucault cites it as a piece of advice given to Diego Velázquez by the artist's teacher, the Spanish Inquisition censor Francisco Pacheco (Foucault, 1966/2002: 9). In retrospect, this phrase is fitting as a motto for Friedl's own work: to create reflexive images that not only stand out from, but that are also released by the frame (the picture) as their material carrier. How exactly this image is produced within the work's realization is, once more, a matter of radical conceptual neutrality.

Children in Peter Friedl's view are the real anarchists of this world, 'the true subalterns' (Friedl, 2011: 58; cf. also Franke, 2010: 58). As childhood is often misrepresented, it provides him optimal material for his methodological investigation. Especially the representation of children in art under socialist realism allows him to circle around, as if a detective, the question of the power of images and how they are subjected to censorship. For example, one of the girls—in a pink dress—visibly holds a copy of the illustrated, communist children's magazine *Fatos* on her lap, providing an ideal occasion to reflect on how children, from a very young age onwards, are indoctrinated with images and texts. Additionally, in making the children stand still and be silent for more than two minutes, *The Children* subverts the logic of militarization that underlies the Kristo painting.

The video thus comes across as a subtle, ironic distortion of the socialist realist style. Kristo's rendition of a seemingly harmonious, though rather odd scene in a mythically prosperous street in communist Albania, is completely idealized. By restaging the scene inside of an existing, actual building now in ruins, Friedl instead makes the scene radically real. Realism is thus transformed into an investigative method, and with it, Friedl appears to reinvent social realism in art after the demise of socialist realism.[3] The irony contained in this act is a generous one. One hears the sound of cars driving on the street: as the artist suggests, this is to emphasize that daily life in Albania, despite all odds, continues (De Keulenaer, 2011: 72).

In *Infancy and History*, Giorgio Agamben reflects on infancy as a philosophical idea that, in linguistic terms, is always present in adult life. He reminds us that it should be possible for us to remember experiences prior to language and subjectivity, marked by muteness or wordlessness. Viewing Friedl's mute images of young children catalyzes memories of the speechlessness that often accompanied early childhood. For Agamben, it is within silence that an understanding of historicity can arise. 'It is infancy,' he writes, 'which first opens the space of history (Agamben, 1978/1993: 60).'

Foucault's book has not yet been translated into Albanian. Only this one sentence now leads its own life in that language, via Friedl's work—as kind of hidden motto. It is as if a fundamental truth about reality arises in the aesthetic experience of the images of these children, the truth that we all long for: to experience absolute and unconditional love for someone. Unconditional love for one's children goes hand-in-hand with an unavoidable vulnerability and immaturity, as it is not necessarily reciprocal. But the openness towards the other encountered in this deliberate immaturity is perhaps what we need most when we wish to find a constructive force for forging new collective identities and for building knowledge about where to go in the future while learning from the past. Friedl's anti-archive, in which the photograph functions as the triggering force for the genesis of a radically neutral, inter-medial body of work, enables us to draw the reflexive, imaginative lessons that truly matter today.

Notes

[1] See, for example, William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). More recently, Georges Didi-Huberman has vehemently opposed this rather fashionable skepticism regarding the political and ethical agency of photographs in his *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. by S.B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003/2008).

[2] See also, to this extent, the recent polemics around the acquisition of Michel Foucault's archives by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: http://www.lemonde.fr/journalelectronique/donnees/libre/20121222/index.html?cahier=ARH [accessed January 13, 2013].

[3] Again, Friedl's method aligns with that of Allan Sekula. Cf. my "Social Realism' Then and Now: Constantin Meunier and Allan Sekula,' in Hilde Van Gelder (ed.), *Constantin Meunier: A Dialogue with Allan Sekula* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 71-91; and Jan Baetens and Hilde Van Gelder (eds), *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula's Photography* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006).

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